



## Residents want answers on Coakley landfill lobbyist

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PORTSMOUTH -- Several city residents and Seacoast elected officials peppered the City Council with questions about the Coakley Landfill Group's decision to hire a lobbyist and how that could impact legislation being proposed to protect people from contaminated water.

Resident Lee Roberts told the City Council during Tuesday night's public comment session that she was "really, really disappointed" to hear about the lobbyist.

"Never in my life would I have thought that anything that this city was involved in would support a lobbyist to fight the effort to protect the health of the citizens of the Seacoast," Roberts said.

City Attorney Robert Sullivan told the Portsmouth Herald in early December that the CLG had hired a lobbyist to "keep track of the legislation" filed in the Legislature that related to the Coakley landfill, a Superfund cleanup site.

State Rep. Mindi Messmer, D-Rye, said the lobbyist told her he was going to lobby against her PFC-related legislation. Messmer appeared at Tuesday's council meeting and asked if the council thought city taxpayers would be "OK spending this kind of money to fight my legislation that's intended to protect the public."

The CLG is made up of municipalities and groups that used the landfill in North Hampton and Greenland, along with companies that transported trash there. Sullivan serves on the CLG's executive committee.

The groups and municipalities have been required to pay into a trust created through a 1991 record of decision by the Environmental Protection Agency and N.H. Department of Environmental Services. The city of Portsmouth has to pay 53.6 percent of remediation costs at the landfill, according to the record of decision.

Tests on monitoring wells at the landfill have found PFCs and 1,4-dioxane, both suspected carcinogens, at levels above the EPA's health advisory levels. Many people living near the landfill are worried chemicals leaching from Coakley will contaminate their residential drinking wells, but so far PFCs found in private wells have tested below the EPA's health advisory level.

NHDES officials have confirmed high levels of PFCs found in nearby Berry's Brook pose a risk to the environment and should be cleaned up.

Former Assistant Mayor Jim Splaine also appeared at Tuesday's meeting and urged the council to support soon-to-be filed legislation that would require the CLG to fall under the provisions of the state's Right-to-Know law.

"I also think you should be supporting legislation that is going to call for more immediate remediation of the Coakley landfill," Splaine said.

He told the council if it didn't act now to address environmental issues at Coakley in time people "are going to look back and consider this a missed opportunity." He also asked the council to follow through on a request he made in December for a report back on how much the CLG lobbyist is being paid, what his duties are and what he's going to lobby for or against.

"I certainly hope he's not going to be objecting to good legislation like Coakley and the Right-to-Know law," Splaine said.

Resident David Meuse told councilors he previously lived in Woburn, Massachusetts, where a number of children were stricken with cancer in the 1960s and 1970s from drinking contaminated water. Muse told the City Council he was "extremely concerned about the contamination from Coakley."

"I've seen what happens to real people when water is contaminated," Meuse said.

He urged the council to be as transparent as possible when dealing with the Coakley landfill, and added "your first responsibility in this situation may not be to the taxpayers, it may be the kids who are drinking that water."

City Manager John Bohenko said city staff would make a presentation to the council focused on the landfill at its Feb. 5 meeting.

"I think it will be important to not only have an explanation of the CLG, but also to talk about the actual science and what's happening out on the location," Bohenko said.

Mayor Jack Blalock believes the report is important for the council to hear and said “when you get accused of funding a lobbyist to fight clean water for our residents, it is upsetting. That’s not something I would certainly want to be a party to.”

Reached Wednesday, Sullivan declined to say how much the lobbyist is being paid. “There will be a full report on the council agenda on Feb. 5,” he said.

Asked if the lobbyist would lobby against Messmer’s legislation, Sullivan said, “no decisions along those lines have been made by the CLG, it is however possible.”

He said the lobbyist was hired because the proposed legislation has the “potential for compelling the expenditure of a tremendous amount of money, primarily by the city of Portsmouth. It seemed prudent to me and CLG executive board that a lobbyist should be retained,” Sullivan said.

Hiring the lobbyist will also allow the CLG to “keep a watchful eye out for the interest of the taxpayers of the city,” Sullivan said, by making sure that if the CLG is required to “spend public money that there is a commensurate public benefit.”

He also stressed the “EPA has determined that activities at the site are protecting the public health.”

“I would not recommend anybody loosening the cap and drinking water from underneath it, but there is no threat to the public health and no one is currently drinking water at any unsafe level because of any activity at the Coakley landfill,” Sullivan said.

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